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# THE VALUES OF ISLAM AND EUROPE IN THE ESSAYS OF POLISH STUDENTS OF ENGLISH AND ARABIC

*Kamilla Termińska*

[This article is in a way a compilation of what I have written in making use of essays written by my students, that is, graduate students of Institute of English, University of Silesia, who study the Arabic language as their minor. Driven by a fully justified pride of a university teacher, in what follows I am going to quote their authorized opinions on values of Islam. In this way, as I hope, I will testify to non-efficiency of attempts to infect their open and noble young minds with viruses of intolerance, hatred and xenophobia. As will be shown, in full agreement with Socratic ethical intellectualism, knowledge and the very scientific and ethical aura that the Institute of English conveys proves to be an effective immunological barrier to these viruses.]

Islam as a cultural movement whose sacralized centrum is the Quran revelation to prophet Muhammad, developed among Semitic peoples. It is a carrier of values that emerged and crystallized for centuries in the Near East. The Semites can be regarded a germ or heirs of the great Eastern empires of the Sumerians, Babylon, Persia and Egypt and a bridge spanning these civilizations and the civilizations of Far East. What we owe to the Semites is the greatest invention of humankind, that is, a Proto-Sinaitic alphabet, which gave rise to all alphabets that are used by human civilization, as well as three great monotheistic religions of Scripts: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Islam has absorbed all principle ideas of its predecessors and in its medieval schisms there appeared even the idea of universalism. Thanks to Islam and to the specific policy of the rulers of the Islamic world extending from India to Spain it was possible to accept cul-

tural plurality and demonstrate profound respect for a distinctive dialogue as the highest values of the modern globalised world. "The essence of Islam lies in an unconditional will to submit to God, in a humble desire of peace and in renouncing pleasures for higher values" (Aleksandra Lederer). The teachings of the Prophet (Qur'anic Revelations) recorded in the Quran after his death, regulate the whole personal and social life of its followers, and are based on five pillars: profession of faith ("There is no other god but God; and Muhammad is the Messenger of God", prayer, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage to Mecca. "Islam is [...] a way of life for millions of people from Morocco to Indonesia. The basic principle of the faith, the duty of almsgiving, can be regarded as one of the first social tax ever. Fasting during the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the Islamic lunar calendar (Ramadan) is a perfect example of self-control, a characteristic highly valued in the contemporary world. [...] Commonly cited estimates of the Muslim population show about 1.2 billion of believers (20% of the world population), still the religion develops and gains new adherents" (Aleksandra Lederer).

Muhammad was not only a charismatic founder of a new religion, a leader and a ruler who transformed the tribal system into a national theocratic one, but he also headed a powerful cultural trend. "Not only did the Arabs establish an empire but they also developed culture. Through their agency the great achievements of the civilizations of the Tigris and the Euphrates, the Nile and the eastern coast of the Mediterranean became available to Medieval Europe, bringing about its cultural awakening and its modern revival. No other peoples in the Middle Ages contributed to progress as much as the Arabs and Arabic-speaking tribes. The Arabs rendered available to European culture the works of ancient Greeks, including Aristotle. During the dark ages that followed the fall of the Roman Empire in the West no effort was made to preserve the ancient Greek manuscripts. When in the Middle Ages the interest in philosophy started to grow, the works of Aristotle returned to Europe... in Arabic" (Karolina Klica). "The Arabs were the first to spread the invention of cheap paper, taken over from the Chinese, which increased the availability of books. They also commenced translating into Arabic ancient works, not only Aristotle but also Euclid and Ptolemy as well as Persian astronomical treatises and Syrian medical scripts. What is more, it was not unreflective acceptance of older knowledge but an attempt to lay foundations for development as Arabic scholars proved admirable continuers of ancient ideas" (Tomasz Grzegorzczyn).

Christian Europe built its system of values through an intensive dialogue with Islam, which was not only the background against which its characteristic qualities became apparent, but also as a kind of aphrodisiac stimulating its cultural and theological activity and determining the very rudiments of thinking about the world. Rationalism (unlike intuitionism and illuminationism) originating in Islam together with the typically Arabic tendency to synthesize created what seems to

be so much European attitude (unfortunately, often a declared one rather than real) manifesting itself in tolerance and pragmatism of enculturation and education approach to social groups and weaker and helpless individuals.

Rationalism and the scientific approach to reality, the kernel of the European civilization, are in a way an outcome of Quran, "the book of divine guidance revealed, which tells us that striving for knowledge is a duty of every Muslim" (Katarzyna Dychtoń). It is not surprising then that the civilization of Islam set science on a pedestal glorifying its merits. "The Islamic Golden Age is the time of Middle Ages, when the conditions for scientific progress were very favourable. Arabic countries were getting richer from international trade, participating and intermediating in an exchange of goods between China, India and the West. This facilitated a dynamic development of patronage. The stand that Islam took on science was diametrically opposed to the position of Christianity. While European church inhibited the development of science, forcing scholars to relinquish their research or to work on it in secret, Islam not only allowed the search for knowledge but it even encouraged and praised it. Muhammad himself is said to claim that »The **ink** of the scholar is more sacred than the **blood** of the martyr«" (Tomasz Grzegorzczyn). "The Muslims made a number of discoveries in mathematics, chemistry, astronomy and medicine and contributed greatly to the development of our civilization" (Katarzyna Dychtoń).

Philosophy is a kind of knowledge which on the one hand provides the ground for other sciences and on the other synthesizes their results, thus creating powerful systems, modeling the modes of life of whole societies and regulating the behaviour of any human being. "For a long time there was no point of contact between Arabic and Christian philosophies; they developed independently. It was only in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. that Arabic philosophy got onto the track of Latin philosophy. By recapturing Toledo, Cordoba (1236) and Sevilla (1248) Christians came across enormous collections of books, later translated from Arabic to Castillian, and from Castillian to Latin to make them available to whole Europe. It soon turned out that many of the books were the lost works of Plato, Euclid, Klaudios Ptolemaios and many other ancient thinkers. Europe got acquainted with the works of Islam scholars such as: Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Ibn Tufail (Abubacer) and Ibn Bajjah (Avempace). Arabs provided European scholastics with Greek texts supplemented by their own interpretation. What is more, Arabic ideas became a part of medieval philosophy, as for example Avicenna's idea of universals, Alfarabi's proof of God's existence or Alhazen's theory of visual perception" (Marcelina Krupa).

"The idea of an ideal Muslim state, in which there rule wisdom and virtue, partly implemented in some parts of early medieval Islam world was developed by a Persian philosopher and musician" Al-Farabi (10<sup>th</sup> c.) known as the "Second Master" of Islamic philosophy. As a follower of Aristotle he introduced logic into Muslim philosophy (Łukasz Konieczniak).

Also medical achievements of Arabs are commonly recognized, “since it was Arabs who were innovators in the area of anesthesiology, surgery and pharmacy. Some of their discoveries are attributed to European and American scholars, whose inventions however were made many centuries later. It is for instance generally believed that the general anesthesia was performed for an operation by an American surgeon Long in 1845. Actually six centuries earlier Arab doctors performed surgeries under inhalant anesthesia with the use of narcotic-soaked sponges placed on the patient’s face. Arabs had an important share in the research and description of human body. As early as in the 12<sup>th</sup> c. Ibn an-Nafs and Ibn Al-Quff provided full documentation of how blood circulates and described the physiology of the heart, which was over 300 years before William Harley, who described blood circulation in 17<sup>th</sup> c. We also owe the first known medical encyclopedia »Kitaab Al-Ma’a« (»The Book of Water«). It was written in the 11<sup>th</sup> c. by Abu Mohammed Abdellah Ibn Mohammed Al-Azdi” (Katarzyna Dychtoń).

“It was also Muslims who created pharmacology as a scientific discipline distinct from chemistry. The inspiration for research in this area was the following quotation from Muhammad: »There is a cure for every illness«, according to which no ailment can be treated as incurable. In the 8<sup>th</sup> c. Ibn Al-Baytar wrote »The Great Book of Pharmacology« and in Baghdad there operated the first pharmacies under state supervision” (Anna Pietrzak).

“Arabic medicine and pharmaceuticals borrowed much from Egyptian and Chinese works. Arabic doctors skillfully operated surgical instruments, especially ophthalmologic ones. The sunnah of Muhammad has numerous references to medical prevention and hygiene. The sentence »**Cleanliness** is half of faith« believed to be uttered by Muhammad as Hadith finds its justification in a story of two angels who came to Muhammad and washed his heart with snow. Quran requires that hygiene be kept as ablution before each prayer: »O you who believe! when you rise up to prayer, **wash** your faces and your hands as far as the elbows, and wipe your heads and your feet to the ankles« [Quran 5: 6]” (Karolina Klica).

“Every bigger Muslim town had a hospital, and some of them had separate wards for those suffering from dysentery, eye diseases, fever etc. One of the best known Arabic doctors Al-Rhazes found the cause of chickenpox and argued that it was possible to fall ill with it only once in lifetime, thus pointing to the existence of the immunological system and its functions. Muslim doctors were also aware of the fact that diseases can be infectious. Hundreds of medical treatises were translated to Latin” (Anna Konieczny).

The names of two great Arabic scholars, “Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, are generally known in Europe. Ibn Sina (980—1037) known in the West as Avicenna, was born in Persia. He is the most famous Muslim philosopher and physician of medieval Europe. Among his works we find philosophical, religious and medi-

cal treatises. As a philosopher Avicenna availed of Aristotle and was also close to Neo-Platonism. He greatly contributed to the development of scholastics in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. As a physician he identified tuberculosis as a contagious disease, which undermined the view held in Europe that the disease was God's punishment for sins. »'Canon medicinae', Ibn Sina's greatest work, linking his medical knowledge to Arabic and Roman medicine, was for a long time the principle medical textbook. Apart from 'Canon medicinae' he also wrote 'Kitab ash-shifa', or 'The Book of Healing'«" (Daniela Szczygieł).

"Ibn Rushd (1126—1198), known as Averroes, was a philosopher, judge and physician born in Spain. Among his numerous works there are translations of Aristotle and critical commentaries on his ideas and treatises on science, religion, law and philosophy. He held the view that philosophy was for intellectuals and religion for the mob. His works exerted a strong influence on Europe, although many considered him controversial as he rejected theology as unnecessary impediment to true knowledge. He claimed that God creating the world designed a mechanism according to which the world develops. For this reason God cannot intervene in earthly matters as this would be against God's own principles. The study of his works at the University of Paris was forbidden by the Pope" (Daniela Szczygieł).

"We also owe much to Muslims in the domain of mathematics; Arabs introduced the digit 'zero', which they borrowed from India and the decimal numeral system. We have also made use of Arabic numerals, which proved useful in mathematical solutions. Problems (e.g., in banking) that previously required a few days of computation could be solved in a few minutes. Al-Khwarizmi, a great Islamic mathematician, is considered to be the father of algebra and elaborated methods of solving complex mathematical problems; he also introduced the square root. He performed numerous experiments, measured the height of the Earth's atmosphere and discovered the principles of magnifying glass. Next to mathematical knowledge, Europe took advantage of Muslim achievements in physics.

It would be difficult to list all breakthrough discoveries made by Muslim scholars, yet an account must be taken of the fact that it was Muslims who described the properties of pendulum, later applied for time measurements. Many of Isaac Newton's discoveries were based on the research carried out by his Muslim predecessors. Muslims were also outstanding chemists and many terms used in this area come from Arabic (alcohol, alkaline, elixir)" (Anna Konieczny).

"Also the history of higher education traces to medieval Arab countries. The first universities in Europe were founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. whereas Muslim higher education institutions originated six centuries earlier" (Katarzyna Dychtoń).

"Trade and the development of economy and economic awareness improved the quality of life in the Muslim society. Muhammad compared poverty to dis-



belief in God and for this reason the use of natural resources and the development of trade followed from religious motives” (Anna Pietrzak).

“Spices (saffron, vanilla, dates, raisins), dyes (indigo, now used as a dye for expensive jeans), perfumes, aromatic oils, heating ointments reached Europe thanks to Arabs. In exchange for them Muslim traders acquired slaves, furs and amber. Some traders described their journey. These descriptions are a valuable source of knowledge about the history of Europe. We learn about Slavs from »The Book of Expensive Jewels« by Ibn Rozteh and from a merchant Ibrahim Ibn Yakub, a Spanish Jew from Tortosa, who between 965 and 966 travelled throughout Central Europe. The most famous Muslim travelers were Al-Idrisi in 12<sup>th</sup> c. and Ibn Batuta in 14<sup>th</sup> c. when the Arabic civilization was gradually declining” (Karolina Klica).

“Scientists unanimously stress the impact of Muslims on the development of so-called Golden Network, i.e., trade routes spanning Europe, Asia and Africa. The necessity to travel, trade and exchange goods led to the invention of banking. Among goods traded there were cattle, silk, tea” (Anna Pietrzak).

“The development of geography and astronomy, and a more practical invention of compass is closely related to traveling”. A pious Muslim has the prescribed religious duty to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, no matter how far from Mecca he lives. Also mosques must be properly oriented so as to indicate the direction of Mecca. “Similarly because of different time zones in the Islam empire – the time for prayer had to be regulated and the time for pilgrimage chosen thanks to month differentiation. For Muslims going to Mecca on pilgrimage from distant places in Europe and Africa heading there were available maps and plans drawn in the 14<sup>th</sup> c. by Ibn Battutah” (Anna Pietrzak).

Also the art of Islam exerted a significant influence on the aesthetics of Europeans. “Muslim art was developed in south-western and central Asia and in northern Africa, and at times it included also the Iberian Peninsula, Sicily and the Balkans” (Marcelina Krupa). Islam, which generally opposed ostentation in art and did not allow figurative representation of living creatures, absorbed and converted elements of Hellenic, Early Christian, and Persian art.

While developing on a large territory “it created various styles constantly influencing one another. Islamic art, characterized by decorativeness and wealth of ornamental details, found its full expression in architecture and artistic craft. This profusion of ornaments is an example of so-called *horror vacui* — a fear of empty spaces. Islamic architecture was characterized by the use of domes, horseshoe and multi-foiled arches, minarets and large courtyards. Mural paintings, brightly-colored mosaics and low relief carving were used. Most often exploited decorative forms were plant and geometric ornaments, which later evolved into arabesque. Islamic architecture is characterized by internal building orientation, and consequently it is often referred to as »hidden architecture« — its beauty is internal, invisible from the outside. Although Arabic tribes are

the main Islamic art manufacturers, the Islamic-style masterpieces may be encountered not only in Arabic countries, but also in Europe. The impact of Islamic art is especially well visible in Spain and in northern Africa as after the Arabic conquest in the 8<sup>th</sup> c. those were the areas of mutual influence of Islam and Western Europe. Both those cultures entwined in Islamic Spain and it was through Spain that Europe became familiar with the Muslim civilization's achievements. Islamic art was probably most profound and refined in the Iberian Peninsula. Middle Ages and Renaissance Spanish art was characterized by decorativeness derived from Mauritanian art, detailed ornaments and certain tension of lines and adornments. Muslim culture, blooming in Spain, had a great impact on the whole Europe, contributing to so-called Renaissance of the 13<sup>th</sup> c.

Several centers of Muslim culture can be mentioned, such as Seville, Toledo, Granada [...] or Cordoba" (Marcelina Krupa). "Multi-foiled arches of the Cordoban mosque were inspiring for later architects and such arches can be seen, for example, in the Durham Cathedral and the monastery of Mount St. Michael in the north of France. Two colored arches consisting of alternating dark and light-colored bricks and stones can be found in Romanesque art (11<sup>th</sup>—13<sup>th</sup> c.) for example in Charlemagne's Palace Chapel at Aachen (Germany), Basel Cathedral (Switzerland) and also in Pisa and Siena (Italy). Arabic dome structure, supported by arches intersecting its vault, evolved into the Gothic (12<sup>th</sup>—15<sup>th</sup> c.). The architecture of the Doge's Palace in Venice and the Teutonic Order castles in Prussia was directly influenced by the Mauritanian brick architecture of Toledo and Seville. Many buildings resembling famous Alhambra or so-called kiosks, that is garden pavilions in which coffee was served, were created in Europe in Baroque and later periods. The works of an English architect Owen Jones in Kensington and Sydenham from the half of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. are the perfect example [...]. The greatest influence of the Islamic art can be observed in Spain, for example in Granada, which was established as an independent kingdom in 1238 by Ibn Ahmar, a prince of the Arab Nasrid dynasty who had been driven south from Saragossa by Christians. Half a century later Granada was the last Mauritanian kingdom in the Iberian Peninsula. The Alhambra, fortress with numerous turrets and at the same time palace complex, is one of the most important tourist attractions in Granada. The name Alhambra means in Arabic »the red one« from the color of its brick walls. This fortress is undoubtedly a crowning achievement of Arabic art in Europe" (Iga Mirzejewska). "At the time of the Umayyad Caliphate Cordoba could boast about one million of inhabitants, numerous intellectual elite, paved and lit streets, 300 baths and several gems of architecture. Library which was created there in 970 had more books [almost 500 thousand volumes] than the whole France. No European city could be compared to it" (Marcelina Krupa).



The standard of living is also documented by services, crafts, trade, way of eating and dressing, health prophylaxis and health care, education and cultural goods. "Arabic civilization aimed at satisfying every day human needs and its development was to facilitate people's lives. This attitude was adopted by Europe, in which restriction of needs and asceticism were preferred in the Middle Ages. However, having access to different standards it was easier for Europe to enter the path of Renaissance" (Paulina Brewczyk). "Arabic attitude towards everyday life can be illustrated by the following example taken from Muslim Spain. When Arabs came to Spain its agriculture was rather passive, adapted to the climate. Olives and crops, perfectly suited to long and dry summer, were grown. Those restrictions vanished with the appearance of Arabs. They did not transfer to Spain their desert habits, which was a usual practice of nomads moving to new territories, but using all their acquired earlier knowledge they created a real paradise promised to them by Islam. Natural environment started to play a double role — practical and decorative. Man shaped the environment not only to benefit from it, but also to live in a dream-like paradisaical world. This particular example presents Arabic contribution to the world culture. This contribution, however, didn't consist in creating new ideas but in a specific attitude aiming at unity and improving already acquired cultural knowledge" (Justyna Turemka).

"Europe was interested in Muslim craft, known for its high quality and high artistic value. Weaving craft (especially different kinds of carpets), pottery, glass, goods made of rock, crystal and various metals and also art of calligraphy and manuscript illumination and binding achieved the greatest variety of forms, high level of workmanship and decorativeness. There were many arts and crafts centers in Arabic countries manufacturing handicraft products for the use of the city and the court but also for export even to such distant places as China or northern Europe. Especially in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> c. ornamented carpets and textiles were exported to Europe. With the progression of time, weaving industry, based on Middle Eastern designs, appeared in Italy. The West drew abundantly from Arabic arts and crafts products and textiles. In Spain, strongly influenced by Islamic art, individual motives were adopted for example in Sicilian and Venetian architecture and also in textiles from Luxembourg and Florence.

Islamic culture and ornaments were also fashionable in Poland in the 17<sup>th</sup> c. Krakow is the city which can boast about the biggest collection of goods inspired by Islamic art; this collection is a perfect example of the closeness of contact between Poland and the Middle East in the 16<sup>th</sup>—17<sup>th</sup> c. At that time the theory about alleged ancient Scythian Sarmatian ancestry was extremely popular among Polish noblemen. Orientalization was a characteristic feature of Sarmatism. Trade and wars conducted by Poland with the Middle East in the 17<sup>th</sup> c. influenced the traditional apparel and jewelry of the Polish noblemen ('kontusz' — *type of outer garment coat*, 'żupan' — *long robe-like garment*,

*always opened in the front, with long sleeves and a row of buttons, 'karabela' — type of Polish saber, 'czaprak' — caparisons, horsetail ensigns, — 'pas lity' — silk sashes, 'złote guzy' — decorative gold buttons etc.). Textiles, carpets and weapon were imported from Turkey and Persia. They were also seized in the battles of Chocim and Vienna. In the 17<sup>th</sup> c. Polish noblemen wore outfits resembling Turkish clothes, bore curved sabers and decorated their houses with carpets imported for example from Levant. In Poland Sarmatism resulted in numerous oriental and oriental-like monuments, it also impacted our literature" (Marcelina Krupa).*

The influence of the Arabs on European everyday life cannot be underestimated. While changing the European way of thinking, hierarchy of values and extending horizons, they also inspired the inhabitants of Europe in terms of art and they reduced the severity and asceticism of everyday life. "Arabs introduced marrows, apricots, sugar cane, rice, saffron, artichokes etc. into poor European diet. They also taught us how to use tableware and they brought greater variety of meals and desserts to our tables" (Daniela Szczygieł). "They taught Europeans rhymed poetry, rhythmical music, courteous manners and how to change clothes with the changing seasons. Arabic literature influenced French troubadour songs" (Marcelina Krupa) and indirectly it shaped the European ideal of love. "»Arabian nights« have been stimulating children's imagination all over the world by enchanting them with wonderful images of the vast deserts" (Anna Pietrzak).

Islam cannot be perceived solely as a phenomenon enriching Europe. It also fosters autotelic values such as depth, solemnity and strength of monotheistic religion, moral nobility of religious doctrine, beauty of rituals and rites, full of devotion and faith attitude towards the revealed words of God — the Holy Quran and Traditions.

"The Holy Quran is a masterpiece, still perceived as an infinite source of knowledge; it constitutes a religious guidance and direction, constantly influencing modern societies. It is also an inspiration for ecumenical dialogue between Christianity and Islam" (Anna Pietrzak). Its Makkan and Madinan suras, full of ardent faith or mystical calmness, present the core values of Islam: mercy, peace, brotherhood and next to Arabic poetry they are a model of the Arabic language.

Classical Arabic, thoroughly elaborated by grammarians and rhetoricians, is able to reflect the most subtle philosophical issues, mystical ecstasy and ethereal states of a human soul. It imposes a definite vision of God, world and man and at the same time it itself constitutes one of the core values of Islam. "Today Arabic is spoken by about 200 million people around the world. Between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> c. there were more philosophical, medical, historical, religious, astronomical and geographical works written in Arabic than in any other language. We can still find traces of the Arabic influence in Western European languages

in the form of numerous loan words. [...] After the *Latin alphabet*, the Arabic writing system is the second-most widely used alphabet around the world” (Aleksandra Lederer).

“Muslims have a strong religious affiliation. Notions of unity, uniqueness and unification are the basis of their culture. This culture came to existence in the 7<sup>th</sup> c. when dispersed and disagreeing Arabic tribes decided to resign from animism, started to believe in one God and created a community. Even now they don’t separate faith from reason and the metaphysical from the material. Islamic politics and religion are one and the same [Islam — Ł.K.] encourages to decrease the rate of progress, to turn to human values, seeking them in one’s past” (Łukasz Konieczniak). It despises European secularized values — freedom of speech and religion, democracy, technical progress etc., achieved by means of resigning from spirituality, omnipresent rivalry and haste, preventing reflection. Such European dichotomies as *sacrum* — *profanum*, social — individual, law — tradition or nature — culture are striking. From the Islamic point of view what is desirable is their common and harmoniously accepted unification which can help to discover — almost in a Hegelian way — new, better quality.

*Translated by Andrzej Łyda and Katarzyna Kołodzka*